

**Testimony to the Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety
Senate Bill 324
Shel Gross, Director of Public Policy**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. Mental Health America of Wisconsin (MHA) does not support this bill as written because it has the potential to further criminalize individuals due to their mental health disorders.

MHA is dedicated to improving the mental health of all individuals through advocacy, education and service. As part of our program offerings our Strong Families/Health Homes (SFHH) program provides services to individuals with mental illnesses who are caregivers to dependent children. Part of our experience with this program has been contracting with the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare (BMCW) to work with some of their families who fit these criteria. As it turns out this is not a trivial number; according to the Office of Performance and Quality Assurance, from 2008-2010, 63% of parents in the BMCW had a mental illness, while 58% also had a substance abuse disorder.

The goals of the SFHH program are to:

- Ensure that children are linked to resources in the community that support their physical and emotional development and success at school.
- Empower and support parents in their efforts to nurture and care for their children.
- Prevent children from developing a mental illness.
- Prevent child maltreatment that results from social isolation.
- Keep families intact and reduce involvement with the child welfare system.
- Reduce the need for psychiatric hospitalizations

A study of the program found the following:

- The average length of time from beginning SFHH services to achieving permanence is 9 months.
- 85% of families working with SFHH were reunified.
- 100% of families that were reunified while involved with SFHH between 2010-present, remained successfully reunified.

It is our experience that parents with psychiatric disabilities are much more likely to be adversely affected by the child welfare and legal systems. There is a presumption that they are unable to take care of their children. However our experience clearly demonstrates that with the proper services and supports these individuals can effectively parent their children.

People with mental illnesses are already heavily criminalized due to their disability. SB 324 has the potential to increase this criminalization. We think that where neglect is occurring due to a parental mental illness that the goal should be the assessment of that individual's need and providing the parent with necessary supports to keep the family together and the child safe. Therefore this legislation must minimally ensure there is a mechanism for such assessment before any referral to law enforcement is made and that appropriate services and supports are provided to support the family.